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ABSTRACT

An indirect/nonreactive technique of assessing spontaneous concern should be used to examine the salience of the threat of nuclear war. Direct/reactive techniques may produce inconsistent results and inadvertently enhance a false consensus. The procedures for the administration, scoring, and interpretation of a spontaneous concern measure along with acceptable reliability and validity estimates are reported. The salience of the threat of nuclear war is associated with worrying about nuclear war more often, higher levels of other nuclear worries, anxiety, depression, anger, and a greater fear of the future in general. Nuclear threat salience does not appear to be associated with several indicators of general anxiety or mental health, but it is moderately associated with the placing of a higher priority on the value of a world at peace. The document includes a list of twenty-three references, two tables of statistics, and two tables of sample questions and scoring guidelines. (Author/PPB)

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Salience of the Nuclear Threat:
Operationalization Through Spontaneous Concern

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American
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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a rationale to use the indirect technique of assessing spontaneous concern to operationalize the salience of the threat of nuclear war. The procedures for the administration, scoring, and the interpretation of a spontaneous concern measure along with acceptable reliability and validity estimates are reported. The salience of the threat of nuclear war is associated with worrying about nuclear war more often and higher levels of nuclear worry, anxiety, depression, and anger plus higher fear of the future in general. Nuclear threat salience does not appear to be associated with several indicators of general anxiety or mental health but it is moderately associated with higher a priority placed on the value of a world at peace.

The movie "The Day After", the accidents at the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl nuclear reactors, the Strategic Defense Initiative budget proposals, the Reykjavik Summit meetings, and the current arms control talks between the US and the USSR are all recent events which have made the threat of nuclear war a salient issue to numerous individuals. Fiske (1987) has summarized the effects of the movies Hiroshima-Nagasaki: 1945 and The Day After as making certain nuclear issues salient and vivid. In the case of The Day After scores of studies were conducted to verify these results (see also Oskamp et al., 1985; Schofield & Pavelchak, 1985). Much of the effort of numerous peace groups is similar to these media events and is designed to keep the nuclear issue salient in the eyes of the general public. Activities such as writing letters to the editors of newspapers, writing articles to appear in various publications, and arranging public speakers, forums and demonstrations dealing with the nuclear threat which are covered by the media would be classified as salience-inducing.

In general, the effect of salience appears to focus an individual's attention on issue relevant thoughts, feelings, and actions (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). This does not, in and of itself, precipitate attitude change. However, it does result in responses consistent with previously held

thoughts, beliefs, and actions which are more extreme or intense than would otherwise have been made (Fiske, 1987). Given the overwhelming support for a bilateral nuclear freeze in the United States and the lack of political involvement on this issue, keeping the nuclear threat salient is important for profreeze and other groups in the "peace movement". While the salience of the nuclear threat is only one aspect related to increasing involvement in political activities concerning nuclear policy, it is, however, an important initial consideration.

Assessing the salience of the threat of nuclear war must involve nonreactive techniques as opposed to the more traditional methods of attitude assessment in social psychology which are reactive. Direct questioning strategies are not feasible in assessing the salience of the nuclear threat since the content of the questions inevitably places the issue of nuclear war in the minds of the respondents. Indirect strategies of questioning, utilizing responses to a single probe or incomplete sentence or a series of them, can and has been employed successfully to assess the spontaneous concern about nuclear war with adolescents (e.g. Escalona, 1965; Bergstrom, 1986; Gillies, 1987; Macpherson & Meador, 1987) and college students (Elder, 1965; Mayton & Delamater, 1986; Mayton, 1986a; Hamilton, 1987b). Despite the merits of this approach, the number of studies utilizing this indirect

method of spontaneous concern is quite small.

The major thesis of this paper is that this indirect technique of assessing spontaneous concern can be used to operationalize the salience of the threat of nuclear war and should be used more often. Reasons for making this assertion include some which are very similar to the plea made by McGuire & McGuire (1981) when they advocated the assessment of the self-concept using a spontaneous measure such as the Twenty Statements Test or the Who Are You? instruments. Regardless of the issue assessed, the use of direct questioning requires the respondent to place him or herself on the appropriate place on a dimension preselected by the researcher. This dimension may in fact be one which never or rarely is important to the respondent but given the request to complete the question she or he will provide a response. It should not be surprising then to find response patterns using these reactive techniques which are sometimes theoretically inconsistent and puzzling since the dimensions assessed may or may not describe issues which the respondents spontaneously think about and are salient to them. The types of biases created by the results of these direct questioning techniques may inadvertently enhance the false consensus bias (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). Many psychologists and psychiatrists have tended to overgeneralize and overinterpret the psychological impact of the threat of nuclear war. This has been noted as a particularly important problem for research on this

topic(e.g. Mayton,1986b; Fiske, 1987). This overestimation of a psychological effect has the potential to reduce the credibility of the researchers on an issue where the consequences in the breakdown of current policy in preventing a nuclear war are cataclysmic. The use of indirect measures of concern should help to temper this type of bias. In addition, given the theoretical implications of both salience and vividness in cognition, there is a need for a sound psychometric device available to profreeze or peace groups to assess the salience-inducing effects of their various activities.

This paper will describe in depth the procedures for the administration, scoring, and the interpretation of a spontaneous concern measure developed by Mayton (1986a) along with reliability and validity estimates. In addition to the reviewing of relevant information already in print in several other sources, this paper will utilize secondary analyses of previously collected data sets, as well as, new data collected for the establishment of the psychometric characteristics of the spontaneous concern measure.

Review of Spontaneous Concern About The Nuclear Threat

Two studies were located which were conducted in the 1960s and utilized a measure of spontaneous concern. Escalona (1965) reported the results of an oral probe which

asked elementary age respondents to indicate what the world would be like ten years from now. She reported that 70% of the children mentioned nuclear war and/or destruction in describing their future. While her method did assess the children's spontaneous concerns to a certain degree, it must be considered somewhat reactive since she did focus the children's attention on "the world". Elder (1965) reported the results of a study which presented college freshmen the two written incomplete sentences "My greatest fear regarding the future is ..." and "I worry about...". Only 7.6% of the sample expressed concern about nuclear war at that time.

Given the rapid increase in research on the psychological impact of the nuclear threat in general, the number of studies using indirect measures or measures of spontaneous concern about the nuclear threat has remained small to the present. No studies were located assessing spontaneous concern about nuclear war in the 1970s. A total of seven studies were located which were conducted in the 1980s and utilized a measure of spontaneous concern. Mayton & Delamater (1986) replicated the Elder study using the same two incomplete sentences with US college students. They reported a significant increase in concern since the 1960s with 18.1% expressing concern about nuclear war in 1982. Mayton (1986a) expanded the spontaneous concern measure to include ten opportunities to mention nuclear war as a fear or worry. Using this Spontaneous Concern About the Nuclear

Threat Scale (SCANTS) during August 1983 with a US college student sample, a total of 50% expressed concern about nuclear war when presented five incomplete sentences of "I worry about..." and five incomplete sentences of "One of my fears regarding the future is...". The rise in the percentage concerned was attributed to the eight additional opportunities to mention nuclear war in the SCANTS. Additional data using the SCANTS, which is reported here for the first time, indicates the salience of the threat of nuclear war in US college students has decreased since 1983. During the fall of 1984 and the fall of 1985 the SCANTS was administered to separate samples of students at a small college in the Pacific Northwest as was the case for the 1983 data reported in Mayton (1986a). In 1984 the percentage spontaneously expressing concern about the nuclear threat was comparable to the 1983 data at 49.1%, but by 1985 the percentage had dropped to only 23.3%. Hamilton (1987a) has gathered data in 1987 using the SCANTS with college students from the Rocky Mountain area of the US. His 1987 data indicates between 15.8% and 21.8% of college students are spontaneously concerned about nuclear war. Thus, based on the trends in this cross-sectional data, it appears that fewer college students are finding the nuclear threat a salient issue today as compared to a few years ago.

The salience of the nuclear threat in US high school students was assessed in 1986 with data reported here for

the first time. This high school sample included 75 eleventh and twelfth grade students enrolled in science classes in a large high school in north central Idaho. Males comprised 60% of the sample and females the remaining 40%. A total of 51.4% of this high school sample spontaneously expressed concern about nuclear war.

In Europe several researchers have been using different indirect assessments of concern about nuclear war. When asked to provide three wishes for the future, Bergstrom (1986) reported that 81% of the girls and 61% of the boys in her Swedish sample indicated peace and war issues in their responses. A total of 87% mentioned war or nuclear war in their three greatest fears. Macpherson & Meador (1987) asked eight to thirteen year olds from South Franken in the rural southern section of the Federal Republic of Germany to indicate three fears of the future during August of 1985. A total of 65% mentioned war as one of their three fears with 38% of the total sample indicating war as their first named fear. Gillies (1987) reported 36% of eleven year olds in the UK in 1984 and 30% of this sample in 1987, when they were 14 years old, indicated war as a spontaneously mentioned worry.

Spontaneous Concern About the Nuclear Threat Scale

Administration and Scoring

The SCANTS is presented in Table 1. The SCANTS has been typically attached to a cover page which has asked for demographic information which has varied depending on the sample and the purpose of the study. Respondents are orally asked to read the directions and to complete each item leaving none blank. No examples are provided to the respondent. Care is taken so that the world situation and issues related to peace and the threat of nuclear war are not discussed. When questions arise, the administrator does not provide guidance concerning the content of the respondent's answers but is nondirective in encouraging the questioner to respond in the way which seems best for them.

Insert Table 1 about here

The SCANTS is scored by analyzing the responses to determine if nuclear war, nuclear destruction, atomic bombs, or some related term is mentioned. Those mentioning nuclear war or a related term are classified as spontaneously concerned and assigned a value of 2. Those not mentioning nuclear war are assigned a value of 1. A list of the key elements of the responses which have been used to classify respondents as being spontaneously concerned about the

nuclear threat is presented in Table 2. Certain responses are borderline responses in terms of classification as expressing spontaneous concern about the threat of nuclear war. The rule of thumb that has been used in past research has been, if there is any doubt, do not include it as an indicator of concern. The borderline responses which have not been viewed as indicating concern about the nuclear threat include references to war and to peace in general without specific reference to nuclear issues. The common responses which fall into this category are also presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Reliability Data for SCANTS

Even with a very minimal explanation of the purpose of the SCANTS, interrater reliability estimates during the initial part of rater training sessions have been estimated to result in 89% agreement between raters. The 11% of the responses which result in differing classifications are nearly always dealing with the borderline issues previously discussed. After further discussion of different responses and practice in scoring them, interrater agreement rates

have consistently climbed to above 97%.

The standard psychometric concern about the reliability of a respondent's views is not a straightforward one for the SCANTS. As a measure of the salience of the nuclear threat, there is reason to suspect that there will be some people who view the nuclear threat as a chronically salient or nonsalient issue while others will find the issue to be salient at certain times but not others. Some instability over even short periods of time would be expected for the salience of many issues and would not necessarily reflect negatively on the measurement technique.

With this reservation in mind the stability of concern about the nuclear threat can be assessed with traditional test-retest data. Hamilton (1987a) has administered the SCANTS to a group of 133 college students twice with a month interval in between. A total of 80.5% of the sample stayed the same in being either consistently concerned or consistently not concerned over the month between assessments. A total of 9.0% of the sample could be viewed as having the nuclear threat chronically salient to them. A total of 19.6% were inconsistent in having the nuclear threat as a salient issue on one but not both occasions. These data appear to describe reasonable reliability for this type of conceptual assessment.

Attitudinal Correlates of SCANTS

The data to support the validity of the SCANTS can be seen in the relationships between the SCANTS and other measures of concern and worry about the nuclear threat and related attitudes. The evidence which will be presented next to substantiate the validity of the SCANTS will be drawn from previously published papers and presentations, from secondary analyses of the data utilized in previously published papers and presentations, and in new data described and analyzed here for the first time. The characteristics of the 1983 college sample have been described elsewhere (Mayton, 1986a). The characteristics of the 1986 high school sample, reported on for the first time in this paper, have been described in an earlier section. A 1987 college sample discussed by Hamilton (1987b) is the final one to be considered in this section. This 1987 college student sample included 133 students enrolled in a state university in the Rocky Mountain states. This sample consisted of 63 males and 70 females.

If spontaneous concern is a measure of the salience of the nuclear threat, scores should differentiate between those who report worrying about nuclear war more often than those who report not worrying often. A 1983 college student sample and a 1986 high school sample completed the SCANTS and then immediately completed the Modified World Affairs Questionnaire (MWAQ, Mayton, 1986c). One question on the MWAQ is particularly relevant to the issue of salience in

that it asks respondents to indicate how often they worry about nuclear war on a six point scale. The behavioral labels for each point on the scale were always think about it, about once a day on the average, about once a week on the average, about once a month on the average, about once a year on the average, and rarely think about it. For this analysis the always think about it, think about it once a day, and think about it once a week responses were collapsed into a single category, the think about it once a month on the average remained a single category and the think about it once a year and rarely think about it became the third category. These collapsed categories were assigned values of 3, 2, and 1, respectively. Chi square analyses and correlation coefficients were computed for both samples. The college chi-square value (14.62, $df=2$, $p<.001$) and the high school chi-square value (6.97, $df=2$, $p<.05$) were both statistically significant. The correlation coefficients for the college and high school samples were .30 and .36, respectively, and were statistically significant in the predicted direction at the .01 level. As expected, persons who expressed spontaneous concern about the nuclear threat were more likely to report worrying more often. Persons who did not express spontaneous concern were more likely to report worrying less often also as expected.

The relationship between the SCANTS and the direct assessment of the degree of worry or anxiety about the

nuclear threat has been assessed in the 1983 and 1987 college samples and the 1986 high school sample. The 1983 college student sample and a 1986 high school sample completed the SCANTS and then completed the MWAQ (Mayton, 1986c). The 1987 college sample completed the SCANTS, the Nuclear Attitudes Questionnaire (NAQ, Newcomb, 1986), the Knox/ Hamilton Scale (KHS, Knox, 1987) and the Spielberger Nuclear Anxiety Scale (Hamilton, 1987b). The correlations between the SCANTS and these direct attitude scales for each sample for which they were used are presented in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

A total of ten of the seventeen correlations were statistically significant. The degree of worry, concern, anxiety, depression and anger concerning the nuclear threat was positively related with spontaneously expressed concern to a moderate but consistent degree. This statement is based on the significant correlations between the SCANTS and the MWAQ worry /probability scale, the NAQ nuclear concern scale and its general nuclear anxiety factor, the KHS nuclear anxiety, nuclear depression, and nuclear scales, and the Spielberger Nuclear Anxiety Scale. Respondents who

expressed spontaneous concern about the nuclear threat were more likely to have higher levels of worry, anxiety, concern, depression and anger about the threat of nuclear war when asked directly. Respondents who did not express spontaneous concern about the nuclear threat were more likely to have lower levels of worry, anxiety and concern about the threat of nuclear war. A significant positive correlation between SCANTS and the NAQ fear of future scale indicates those that find the nuclear threat salient tend to have a higher fear of the future than those for whom the nuclear threat is not salient as determined by the SCANTS. Respondents who were spontaneously concerned were also less likely to have higher scores on the NAQ nuclear denial scale than those not expressing spontaneous concern. No relationships were found between spontaneous concern about the nuclear threat and beliefs about the effectiveness of our civil defense program, about the policy to escalate a nuclear war should one occur, about the destructiveness of a nuclear war and about support for nuclear energy and the need for nuclear weapons.

The relationship between the SCANTS and different attitudinal orientations toward the threat of nuclear war has been assessed in the 1987 college sample and the 1986 high school sample. Both samples completed the SCANTS and the Nuclear Orientation Questionnaire (NOQ, Hamilton, Chavez, & Keilin, 1986). The correlations between the

SCANTS and the NOQ typologies are presented in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

The relationship between the salience of the nuclear threat as measured by the SCANTS and the philosophical orientations identified and assessed by the NOQ are not as easily interpretable. While more significant correlations are obtained than would be expected by chance, all of the significant correlations were found in the college sample with no cross-validation in the high school sample. The lack of significant relationships in the high school sample may be partially a function of a relatively small sample. However, additional cross-validation work is clearly needed given the disparity between the coefficients for the two samples in all but one instance concerning the evaluation of the Romanticist orientation. To a marginal degree those respondents who found the nuclear threat salient tended to be less likely to agree with the Romanticist position that human beings are basically good, rational and caring and the political leaders will act for the good of humanity and nuclear war will be prevented.

Personality Correlates of the SCANTS

The relationship between the salience of the nuclear threat and the priority given to the value of a world at peace, as defined by the Rokeach Value Survey (Rokeach, 1973), was calculated for a sample of 27 college students during the fall of 1985. Higher nuclear threat salience was significantly associated with a higher priority placed on a world at peace ($r = -.41$). Keeping in mind that lower numbers are associated with higher rankings in one's value hierarchy, the mean rank for the value of a world at peace was 6.89 for the spontaneously concerned group and 11.00 for the nonconcerned group.

Mayton (1985,1986c) administered the SCANTS and several personality scales to a sample of 102 US college students from the Pacific Northwest. Significant but marginal correlation coefficients indicated that persons in this sample who expressed spontaneous concern about the nuclear threat tended to have lower general self esteem ($r=.18$ for the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale), higher verbal self concept ($r =.26$ for the Marsh Self Description Questionnaire III), and lower femininity scores ($r = -.17$ for the California Psychological Inventory).

Hamilton (1987b) found the correlation between SCANTS and the same Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale to be nonsignificant in his college sample. Therefore, the relationship between the salience of the nuclear threat and self esteem needs further assessment. Hamilton also found

no significant correlations between the SCANTS and the SCL-90R General Symptoms Index, the Satisfaction With Life Scale, or either the state or trait scales of the Spielberger Anxiety Scale. Salience of the nuclear threat does not appear to be related to mental health measures.

While Hamilton (1987) found no correlation between pronuclear activism as measured by the Werner & Roy Scale, he did find a small but significant correlation between the SCANTS and the antinuclear activism scale. College students who spontaneously express a concern about the nuclear threat tend to be slightly more likely to report engaging in antinuclear activities than those not expressing concern. This pattern of relationships is to be expected given the strong public sentiment supporting a nuclear freeze combined with the research in social cognition which suggests that salience enhances behavior in a more extreme but consistent fashion with beliefs already held.

Conclusions and Implications

Data have been reported supporting the contention that spontaneously expressed concern about the nuclear threat as measured by the SCANTS is a reasonable choice in assessing the salience of the nuclear threat. Evidence for the interrater reliability of the SCANTS along with stability estimates congruent with the concept of salience are

provided. In addition, correlational data with attitudinal variables, values and personality variables are generally consistent with the expectations and provide some evidence for the concurrent validity of the SCANTS.

The salience of the threat of nuclear war is associated with worrying about nuclear war more often and higher levels of nuclear worry, nuclear anxiety, nuclear depression, and nuclear anger plus higher fear of the future in general. Nuclear threat salience does not appear to be associated with several indicators of general anxiety or mental health but it is moderately associated with higher a priority placed on the value of a world at peace. The positive relationship between nuclear threat salience and antinuclear or profreeze behavior is clearly consistent with theoretical expectations of issue salience in this instance. While the results for the relationship between nuclear threat salience and nuclear worry and anxiety appears quite strong, replication of the other findings is still needed. In addition, longitudinal studies with systematic salience-raising interventions are needed to begin to assess potential causal relationships between nuclear threat salience and these attitudinal and personality variables.

One interesting implication of the availability of a reasonably sound measure of the salience of the nuclear threat involves the potential for the assessment of nuclear denial. There appears to be a consistent and positive

correlation between spontaneously expressed concern about the nuclear threat and how often people indicate they worry about nuclear war. Nuclear denial at least on a temporary basis might be defined by response patterns which deviate from this positive correlational relationship. Individuals who spontaneously indicate that the nuclear threat is salient but report that they do not worry about nuclear war very often may be simply experiencing a temporary salience episode or they may be engaging in a type of nuclear denial. Individuals who do not spontaneously indicate that the nuclear threat is salient but report that they do worry about nuclear war very often may be simply experiencing a temporary lack of salience regarding the nuclear threat or they may be engaging in a different type of nuclear denial. Thus, two different types of nuclear denial might be identified by combining both the direct and indirect assessments of concern about the nuclear threat. Additional research on the topic of nuclear denial is needed in general and the operationalization of denial as outlined here may prove to be a fruitful avenue to take.

It has been estimated that there are thousands of "peace groups" or organizations at the present time in the US. Given the finite and relatively small monetary resources available despite continual fund raising efforts, it seems obvious that expenditures should be intelligently made to further the goals of the peace movement and not

spent on ineffective activities. The spontaneous concern about the nuclear threat scale seems to be a good choice as a dependent measure for interventions designed to impact nuclear threat salience. Applied field experiments using the SCANTS as one outcome measure are definitely appropriate at this time.

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Table 1

Spontaneous Concern About Nuclear Threat Scale (SCANTS)

Complete each of the following sentences in a way that expresses your real feelings. Please respond differently to each.

1. I worry about
2. I worry about
3. I worry about
4. I worry about
5. I worry about

Complete each of the following sentences in a way that expresses your real feelings. Please respond differently to each.

1. One of my fears regarding the future is
2. One of my fears regarding the future is
3. One of my fears regarding the future is
4. One of my fears regarding the future is
5. One of my fears regarding the future is

Table 2

Scoring Guidelines for
Spontaneous Concern About Nuclear Threat Scale (SCANTS)

Typical Concern Terminology	Typical Borderline Nonconcern Terminology
Nuclear war	War
Nuclear destruction	Peace or peace of world
World War III	World destruction
Soviet or Russian missiles	Russia or Soviet Union
Atomic or nuclear weapons	World becoming communist
Nuclear stupidity	World preservation
Getting nuked	World affairs
Blowing up the world	Human extinction

Table 3

Correlations Between Spontaneous Concern/ Nuclear Attitudes

	College Samples	High School Sample
	1983 Data	1986 Data
	(n=159)	(n=38)
MWAQ Scales (Mayton, 1986b)		
Civil Defense Effectiveness	-.03	.05
Escalation Policy	-.08	.06
Nuclear War Outcome	-.03	.01
Worry/Probability	.18 *	.56 **
	1987 Data	
	(n=133)	
NAQ Scales (Newcomb, 1986)		
Nuclear Anxiety	.37 ***	
Nuclear Concern	.41 ***	
Nuclear Support	-.07	
Fear of Future	.24 **	
Nuclear Denial	-.32 ***	
Knox/Hamilton Scales (Knox, 1987)		
Nuclear Anxiety	.27 ***	
Nuclear Depression	.22 **	
Nuclear Anger	.23 **	
Spielberger Nuclear Anxiety	.29 ***	
(Hamilton, 1987)		
*** p < .001	** p < .01	* p < .05

Table 4

Correlations Between SCANTS and Nuclear Orientations

	1986 HS Sample (n=74)	1987 College Sample (n=133)
NOQ		
Typologies		
Romanticist	-.21	-.19 *
Hedonist	-.14	-.04
Stoic	-.11	--
Deterrentist	.05	-.19 *
Altruistic Fatalist	-.07	-.33 ***
Disarmist	-.10	.15 *
Theist	-.17	.00
Eliminationist	.07	--
Survivalist	.01	--

*** p < .001

** p < .01

* p < .05